

## **JAYANTA MAHAPATRA AS AN ADEPT IN PROJECTING INDIAN SENSIBILITY, EXPOSING SOCIAL REALITIES AND PICTURING CONTEMPORARY SCENE THROUGH SUGGESTIVE AND STARTLING IMAGERY: AN APPRAISAL**

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<p><b>Article History:</b></p> <p>Received: 08 Jan 2018; Received in revised form: 17 Jan 2018; Accepted: 17 Jan 2018; Published online: 10 Feb 2018.</p> <hr/> <p><b>Key words:</b></p> <p>Lonely, Social Reality, Indian Sensibility, Suggestive Imagery, Hunger, Misery, Poverty, Image of Woman, Contemporary Scene.</p>	<p>This paper is an attempt to show how Indian English poetry came into its own as being genuine and sincere in its expression and communication in spite of it being young in years and how Indian milieu forms a vital part of it, projecting especially Jayanta Mahapatra as an adept in exposing Indian sensibility, social realities and picturizing contemporary scene through suggestive and startling imagery with a focus on the misery hunger, loneliness and isolation of the Indian poor so as to attest proof of social reality and Indian sensibility.</p>

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Indian poetry in English has been known variously as Indo-Anglian, Indo-Anglian, Anglo-Indian, Indo-English poetry since Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, Aurobindo Ghosh and Sarojini Naidu started expressing themselves in this 'alien' language. These terms describe the poetry written in English between 1825 and 1945. But since then, the Indian poetry in English has come into its own and these nomenclatures have been obsolete. Poets writing in English have since drawn their inspiration from what Arvind Krishna Mehrotra calls, "their own backyard (with Kapilar, Paranar, Allama Prabhu, Kabir, Tukaram, Nirala, Faiz and the current socio-economic scenario) as well as Browning, Yeats, Pound, Auden, Williams, Stevens and Ginsberg. The language and diction is more contemporary, as is the imagery,

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leading to the “chutinification” or “biryанизation” of the language so as to identify with the Indian culture and ethos. Modern Indian poetry in English has, indeed, come into its own.

Modern Indian poetry in English is genuine and sincere in its communication, in spite of its being young in years and the Indian milieu forms a vital part of it. The language is foreign but the sensibility and the spirit which moulds the language to its need is vitally Indian. The garment is foreign but the flesh and bones and blood flow are Indian. The new forms of Indian poetry in English was something of protest marking a significant departure are not only in respect of the subject matter but also in the manner of expression, which “involves both the choice of language and the flow of the rhythm – that is being adjusted and attuned to the temper of the new age. Poets like Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot, Auden, Dylan Thomas, perhaps also Allen Tate and Wallace Stevens, have taught our poets the importance of taking their art seriously. They have realized that easy writing cannot make a good poetry. Neither mere imitation nor wanton angularity, neither frantic incoherence nor fabricated obscurity, can make words live or sing themselves out. The profession of poetry is a consecrated endeavour and an exacting discipline. It is to the credit of the ‘new poets’ that they are prepared to take their vocation seriously” (Iyengar 649). The Indian poets have the courage to write in English though it is a second language – a foreign language. As Mahapatra admits in his poem, “Even if No one takes my poems seriously”:

“Yes, there’s a poem growing  
with a foreign language which keeps my head up;  
I don’t try to explain  
Whether it is the right thing to do or wrong.”

In contrast to Ezekial, Parthasarathy and Daruwalla, Mahapatra’s conception of poetry is nothing but the record of an evolving consciousness, with all its distress, guilts, frustrations, contradictions and false starts. He puts emphasis on memory as a source. But in some of the concepts like the form of poetry, quest for roots, he identifies himself with other Indian English poets. In his opinion, poetry is an expression of his inner world and problems about the relationship between self and reality. According to him, “A great poem lets us embark on a sort of journey or voyage through symbols and allusions to encompass human condition” (Literary Criteria 9).

Indian poets in English write exclusively of their lives and of the present day world as in Ezekiel’s ‘Background Casually’, Shiv K.Kumar’s ‘Broken Columns’, Parthasarathy’s ‘Rough Passage’, Ramanujan’s ‘Self-Portrait’, Kamala Das, ‘An Introduction’. One important feature of Indian poetry in English is the attempt to acclimatize indigenous traditions into English. Ramanujan tries to assimilate the South Indian tradition into English. Parthasarathy speaks of the Tamil past. Likewise, Jayanta Mahapatra’s ‘Relationship’ deals with the relationship of the poet with his culture, past and the tradition of his native land. One of the best known Indian poets writing in English, Jayanta Mahapatra was born on October 22, 1928 in a Christian family in Cuttack (Odisha). He was educated at Stewart European School and Ravenshaw College, Cuttack and Science College, Patna. He taught at various colleges in Orissa till his retirement as Reader in Physics, Ravenshaw college, Cuttack.

By all standards, Mahapatra’s tryst with the Muse came rather late in life. He started writing poetry when he was into his 40’s. His poems were first published abroad in

journals like the *Critical Quarterly*, the *Kenyon Review* and the *Sewanee Review*. His collection of more than a dozen anthologies includes *Close the sky, Ten by Ten* (1971), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Relationship* (1980), *Life Signs* (1983), *A Whiteness of Bone* (1992) and *Shadow Space* (1997). Mahapatra also wrote in Oriya and translated frequently from Oriya Literature. He is said to have rendered into English the works of leading Oriya poets like Gangadhar Meher, Sachi Routay, Soubhagya Mishra and Sitakanta Mahapatra in *Counter Measures* (1973) and also edited *Chandrabhaga* (A Literary Journal), *Kavya Bharati* and the poetry section of *The Telegraph*. In recognition of his literary achievement, many awards were heaped on him. Among the numerous awards and honours, he has been the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1981, the PadmaShri Award in 2009, and the SAARC Literary Award in 2010.

Mahapatra's sensibility is essentially Indian. The secret of his success lies in not discovering his Indian inheritance and not falling a prey to what has been called a feeling of alienation. His Indianness is at its best in his poems about Orissa, where the local and the regional is raised to the level of the universal. Orissa Landscapes, Evening in an Orissa village, The Orissa poems and Dawn at Puri are Oriya first and, therefore, Indian too. No doubt, poverty, hunger and starvation have been chronic in India; they are the most significant facet of the life of the Indian masses. They also constitute a major theme in Mahapatra's poetry. The theme is studied from various angles and different points of view and its varied nuances and poignant realities are brought out with intensity and credibility in 'Hunger', 'The Whorehouse in a Calcutta street' and 'Man of his Night'. These poems are also three different studies of male sexuality and the exploitation of women. Consciousness of the poverty and the suffering of the Indian masses and of women as victims of male lust in a male-dominated society, imparts to Mahapatra's poetry is a tragic-pessimistic tone. Another major theme of Mahapatra's poetry is 'human relationship' centring round sexual love as 'Lost' in the Logic and 'The wholehouse in a Calcutta Street'. In a word, it may be said that Mahapatra's poetry spring from deep personal experiences.

Generally speaking, Indian English poetry emerges from the Indian soil. The poets have their own background to write poetry. Like other English poets, Mahapatra too considers Orissa as the seed-ground of his flouring art. He admits his indebtedness to the soil himself:

"To Orissa, to his land in which my roots lie and his past and in which lies my beginning and my end, where the wind keens over the grief of the River Daya and the waves of the Bay of Bengal fail to reach out today to the firelight soul of Knonarka, I acknowledge my debt and my relationship" (Mohanty 65).

The focus of his poetic creativity is centered on the 'Naked earth'. The mythological, symbolic or aesthetic structures firmly rooted in that 'Naked Earth' of which Orissa and India form a significant part. Born and brought up in Orissa, Mahapatra was expected to write in Oriya, but he has chosen the medium of English for his literary creations. As he says,

"I am in love with English. And then, my schooling was in English and I learnt my language from British school masters – mainly from English Novels .... Further I feel I can express myself better in English than in Oriya" (Mahapatra 59).

Though he was born into a Christian family in a predominantly Hindu society, he wrote in an acquired medium of English. But yet, the themes that dominate his poetry are related to such stark realities of India as hunger, starvation, myths, rituals, sexuality, poverty, human relationship, spirituality, self and also eternity. The strength of Mahapatra's poetry comes from his living intimately with his place. The place, with all its ethos and myths, its loves and beliefs, superstitions and transitions has been the governing factor of his poetry. In the words of Parthasarathy, "Orissa is the hub of Jayanta Mahapatra's iconoclastic perambulations" (P 207).

Jayanta Mahapatra generally deals with the theme of hunger, philosophy, human suffering, sex, sensual sordid realities of life at Orissa and Puri, business enterprise, subtle and complex personality, Indian sensibility human frustration and disappointment, for which many poems can be cited as apt examples. For example, the poem 'Hunger', the dramatic monologue unfolding in four taunt stanzas, is based on the privations of a poor fisherman who drives his young daughter into prostitution. Hunger for food merges with the hunger for sex as the narrator-protagonist as the narrator-protagonist accepts the fisherman's offer of his daughter, while 'Dhauri' is a sensitive account of the Kalinga War (261 BC) that wiped off thousands of lives to satiate, a single individual's hunger for power and 'Grandfather', an account of the harrowing experiences of his grandfather, Chintamani Mahapatra who was compelled to convert into Christianity on account of hunger and starvation during the famine. The poem 'A Country' picturizes universal suffering with a comment on all poverty-stricken Asian countries from Turkey to Cambodia and the poem is replete with socio-economic and socio-political understones, making an implicit critique of the prevailing social scenario where vast disparities exist between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots, where rampant poverty engenders violence and where all "voices" against the prevailing social systems are brutally crushed. This poem 'A Country' is also about hunger that engenders bloody revolutions leading to bloodshed and violence, as has happened in the past, while the poem 'The Whorehouse in a Calcutta' pictures the condition of an alienated individual in the modern world and 'The Exile' is a poem talking about the miserable state of the modern man's mind being broken-mentally and morally giving vent to feelings of distress and frustration.

Mahapatra is, above all, an Oriya poet and the Oriya landscape constitutes the most important and significant theme in his poetry. The Oriya landscape, the Orissa cultural history and background, the Orissa social life and the rites and rituals of the people of Orissa lend a regional outlook to his poetry. Through these, he deals with human relationship, India's social problems, love, sex marriage, morality, the workings of the human mind and Nature. M.K.Naik rightly observes:

"Mahapatra's poetry is redolent of the Orissan Scene and the Jagannath temple at Puri figures quite often in it" (207).

In a good number of poems like Dawn at Puri, Taste for Tomorrow, Slum, Evening Landscape by the River and Events, he tries to evoke an atmosphere of lost glory, lost ecstasy of the culture of Orissa. His sensibility is essentially Indian. His Indianness is seen at its best in his poems about Orissa. K.A. Panilker aptly says:

"An examination of the recurring images in Mahapatra's poems reveals that he is Oriya to the Core" (118).

Puri is a living character in several of his poems like *Indian Summer, Poem, This Stranger, My Daughter*. In the poem *Taste for Tomorrow*, the picture of Puri is portrayed with a number of symbols of reality:

At Puri, the crows  
The one wide street  
lolls out like a giant tongue  
.....  
And at the Street's end  
the crowds thronging temple's door.

In such poems, the local environment becomes symbolic of India as a whole. What is happening in Puri as depicted in the poem is typical of India as a whole. S.Viswanathan has rightly pointed out, "the poet's sensibility is both Indian and modern and his response to the Indian scene is authentic and credible" (P5). In the poem "Village", the poet does create a word picture which is at once native and emotive:

Carefully I cross  
The palm trunk bridge over the Irrigation canal.

In *Summer*, too, there is the evocation of such an atmosphere that is typically a rural scene:

A ten-year-old girl  
Combs her mother's hair  
Where crows of rivalries  
are quietly resting  
The home will never be hers

The real context of his poetry is the environment which he encounters in his daily life. Eventhough he is a Christian, he loves the old lyrics of Radha and Krishna. He brings in the principles of Hindu religion. His poetry often records a distance between himself and the customs of his surroundings. There are sounds of temple bells, the prayers of priests, the funeral pyres, of which he is not a past. Of his own local heritage, he writes:

"I don't know much about it.  
I know I love old lyrics of Radha and  
Krishna written by Banamali and others" (Normans 32)

Poetry is the juxtaposition of the abstract and the concrete, the expected and the unexpected, the juxtaposition often stemming from what Eliot calls a unified sensibility. No doubt, Mahapatra is obviously on a high romantic pedestal making familiar things unfamiliar by throwing over them what Wordsworth calls 'a certain colouring of imagination'.

Besides the dominant Orissa landscape, the dominant theme in Mahapatra's poetry is sex, sexuality, love and social concerns. The imagery employed "grips us by the sleeves," to quote a phrase in one of Mahapatra's poems. All his poems can be characterized as imagist poems in their i) use of the language of common speech but employing the correct word; ii) avoiding clichés; iii) creating new rhythms for the expressions of a new mood; iv) allowing absolute freedom in the choice of a subject; v) presenting concrete, firm and definite images; vi) striving always for concentration and vii) suggesting rather than offering complete statements. In *Dawn at Puri*, for instance, there are images of the endless crow-noises, a skull lying in the holy sands of seashore, white-clad elderly widows



waiting to enter the temple of Lord Jaganath, with their austere eyes staring like those caught in the net. *Taste for Tomorrow* begins with “At Puri, the crows”, followed by the image of the one wide street lolling like a giant tongue; the five lepers moving aside to make way for a priest, the crowds thronging the temple door and finally, a huge holy flower swaying in the wind, not swaying in the natural breeze but swaying in “the wind of greater reasons”. In *Evening Landscape by the River*, we have the fishermen’s broken shacks by the river, a temple standing frail and still in the distance as though lost in a reverie, and a six-month old child crawling across the dung-washed the floor. The time is evening and some slight laughter is audible. Over “the abundant darkness of water”, the uncertain light of the moon is falling and resting there like a familiar but useless ornament. Thus, there are not only the essential images but also such incidental but realistic images as the “dung-washed floor” and “like a familiar but useless ornament”, which build up the particular scene and the particular ambience.

The imagery in the poem *Events*, though incidents and events being seemingly unrelated and unconnected is equally vivid, like the town’s dusty streets, the moonlight falling on a rooftops and a distant whistled tune imparting sadness to the night. This is followed by the imagery of smoke lurking in the distance on a riverbank and of a lone funeral pyre burning in the midst of the pipal trees, followed by a conceited Rotarian expounding the secrets of American business enterprise to a group of disinterested listeners in the second floor conference – room of the local YMCA. *Indian Summer Poem* and *A Missing Person* are also good examples of the imagist poetry. In *Indian Summer Poem*, first we have the image of a somber wind moaning and of the priests chanting holy verses in such loud voices that it seems that the whole of India has opened its mouth. Next comes the image of crocodiles moving into deeper waters, to be followed by refuse-heaps smouldering and smoking under the sun. Finally, there is the image of a good wife relaxing in her husband’s bed through the long afternoon and continue dreaming about with feeling exhausted by the deep roar of funeral pyres. These, according to Mahapatra, are the chief features of an Indian Summer. The short poem *A Missing Person* contains a picture of the darkened room in which a woman, standing before a mirror with a burning oil-lamp in her hand, cannot find her reflection in the mirror. Only the “drunken yellow flame” of the oil-lamp knows where her lonely body hides, the lonely body being her essential being or her inner personality. The poem *The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of a Republic* contains highly suggestive and startling imagery such as the jungles have become gentle; the women have become restless.

Then, the image of woman as victim of cruel forces is vivid in many of his poems. Women are pictured as sex objects as portrayed in the poem *Afternoon*:

“The two big arsed Srikakulam women”. Who have strayed into a shop for four kilos of rice ignite lust in the shopkeeper who ogles at them with “wide hunger in his eyes” and “Fans himself in the lethargy of his dream’ not only those other women but even the wife is pictured as a sex object as it is seen in the poem *Idyll*:

“Something in a woman’s eyes tempts confessions for her husband as  
they stretch out to sleep”

Each night she is exploited by the man to bury his ‘hurt’ insider her. The man never cares for her feelings. She is an object of sex to fulfill his physical needs.

Mahapatra exposes the social reality and voices the utter helplessness through the image of a victim girl who is raped in a temple and again in a police station:

“In the Hanuman Temple  
the priest’s pomaded jean-clad son  
raped the squint-eyes fourteen-year fisher girl  
her father found her at a police station  
assaulted again and over again by four  
policemen” (The Lost Children of American).

In the poem entitled *Man of his nights*, the image of whore is painted with artistic beauty as the lines depict:

“The plump whore has just left’  
has brazenly gone to work  
on a new customer.”

The whore image in the opening stanza of *The Lost Children of America* is significant as he equates the ‘whole’ with ‘the politicians’ and both of them make use of the same place for their trade. The Indian women have a link with the natural order and passively wait for what the world will only let them do. The Indian women’s blind unshakable faith in Hindu religion is again portrayed in *These Women*. The poet exposes the weakness of women by satirically questioning about the attitude of women:

“what do they live for  
beyond the veils of innocent prayer  
the climb up and down the holy stairs?”

Mahapatra not only brings out woman’s blind faith in religion but also the passivity of women. In some of his poems, he tries to explore the isolation and loneliness of women. The Indian women are preoccupied with absence, silence, loneliness, alienation and hollowness. Again, the image of a lonely woman who longs for the past experience and her nostalgic attitude is well pictured in the poem *Old Earth*:

“And in her eyes  
the dim flower of her days glows  
from the old earth at its roots”.

In the poem, *The Whorehouse of a Calcutta Street*, the woman is pictured as a passive tool. She is not an active sharer in the guilt. The sexual encounter then takes place. Tired and bored, she takes to it rather mechanically. Her response is brazen indicating her helplessness and her absolute indifference to what happens to her. The poem is an important social document focusing attention on the hunger and misery of the Indian poor so as to attest proof of social reality and Indian sensibility.

Thus, to conclude, Mahapatra has richly used suggestive and startling imagery with the sole intention of exploring social realities and projecting Indian sensibility by all means in his poetic realm.

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